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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 002598

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SUBJECT: URIBE CONFIDANT JAIME BERMUDEZ SWORN IN AS NEW
FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: BOGOTA 2535

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor David M. Zimov
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) President Uribe named Jaime Bermudez Merizalde Foreign Minister on July 17, replacing Fernando Araujo. Bermudez, a close Uribe confidant and Colombia's ambassador to Argentina since September 2006, was President Uribe's communications director in the 2002 presidential campaign and throughout the president's first term. Representative Nicolas Uribe, who worked with Bermudez in Narino Palace, said Bermudez would provide blunt advice to the president on a full range of issues. As the new FM, he would bring new energy to the GOC, and represent a check on the president's sometimes quick decision making. The move follows President Uribe's June 20 decision to name Fabio Valencia Cossio Minister of Interior and Justice. Valencia has moved to shore up GOC relations with the Courts and in the Congress--where any constitutional change process for a possible third term would begin if Uribe decides to run again. End summary.

NEW FOREIGN MINISTER JAIME BERMUDEZ

2. (U) President Alvaro Uribe on July 17, named former-Colombian Ambassador to Argentina and Narino Palace insider Jaime Bermudez foreign minister, replacing Fernando Araujo. Bermudez is a close confidant of President Uribe. He served as Communications Director for Uribe's 2002 presidential campaign and as the president's Communications Advisor during Uribe's first term (2002-2006).

3. (C) Former-President Cesar Gaviria -- who hired Bermudez for key jobs in the early 1990s -- and Representative Uribe told us separately that Bermudez remains one of only a handful of individuals in the GOC not intimidated by Uribe. He has the president's full trust, can speak bluntly to the president, and represents a check on Uribe's tendency to sometimes take quick or emotional decisions. Representative Uribe, a U Party founder who worked with Bermudez in Narino Palace during the president's first term, added that Bermudez maintains a reputation for always having fully-analyzed options and solutions at hand when confronted with a problem. Gaviria said that the GOC -- and the increasingly fractured U Party -- missed Bermudez' counsel on a full range of issues since he took up his post as Ambassador to Argentina in

September 2006. He reportedly took the jobs to recuperate from his time in the Palace.

14. (U) Bermudez studied at Oxford University with President Uribe in 1998, and earned a Ph.D. in political science from Oxford specializing in public opinion. He wrote his dissertation on the impact of scandals on the presidency. He served as Human Rights Counselor to President Gaviria (1991-1993), Advisor at the Foreign Ministry and Coordinator for the Colombia-Venezuela Bilateral Commission (1993-1994), and as a UN election observer in South Africa (1994). He also served on the board of directors of Colombia's export council (Proexport) and advised numerous multinationals on strategic communications. He is 42, married with two children, and speaks English.

NEW TEAM ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE CONGRESS & COURT RELATIONS

15. (U) The decision to bring Bermudez into the Cabinet comes on the heels of Uribe's June 20 decision to name Fabio Valencia Cossio as Minister of Interior and Justice, replacing Carlos Holguin. Valencia, a long-time senator and "conciliator," maintains excellent relations with both the Congress and the high courts. Senate President Nancy Patricia Gutierrez told us that Valencia remained well positioned to represent Uribe in the sometimes rebellious Congress--a key if Uribe decides to run for a third term since the constitutional reform process to allow another term would start in Congress.

16. (C) Superior Judicial Council Magistrate Angelino Lizcano told us Valencia had the temperament and experience to work

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towards a reconciliation with the Supreme Court, though serious differences remain. On July 17, Valencia named former Bogota Superior Court Magistrate (and former Supreme Court auxiliary magistrate) Edgar Sanabria Melo as Vice Minister for Justice. "El Tiempo," quoting a senior GOC official, reported that the move represented a message to the Courts that, "we are with you." Sanabria's appointment follows initial meetings between Valencia and Supreme Court magistrates on July 10, and a six hour Uribe-Supreme Court meeting July 14. Still, Supreme Court President Francisco Ricaurte told us that serious differences between the executive and the Court remained, making a long-lasting rapprochement unlikely (reftel).
BROWNFIELD